

Submission to the Review of the 2012 ACT Election Campaign

Chris Monnox, 20th November 2012

Much is sure to be written about every aspect of the election campaign waged by the ACT ALP in 2012. A good part, though certainly not all of this, in my view, will be premature. Further to this, I do not consider myself able to render a credible judgement on the campaign without all, or at least most, of the documentation produced in the course of it before me. Though it has its place, anecdote misleads- easily.

What can be judged, and what it is my intention to judge, is the outcome of the campaign as described in the most basic way. There was a 1.53 per cent swing to ACT Labor, a 7.34 per cent swing to the Canberra Liberals and a 4.89 per cent swing against the ACT Greens, with the result that the parties won eight seats, eight seats and one seat in the Legislative Assembly respectively. This represented a gain of one seat for ACT Labor, two seats for the Canberra Liberals and a loss of three seats for the ACT Greens. ACT Labor attained 38.88 per cent of the primary vote, the Canberra Liberals attained 38.9 per cent and the ACT Greens attained 10.75 per cent.

A Labor Town?

Canberra is often described as a Labor town. This is at once both an accurate assessment and a myth. It is an accurate assessment in so far as the ALP usually does well in ACT electoral contests. Between 1970 and 2010, the electors of the ACT went to the polls to elect representatives on 28 occasions. 22 times, they returned more Labor candidates than they did candidates from any other party or grouping.

This description becomes misleading only when it is assumed to mean that the ALP will *always* win, or at least manage to lose respectably. The Labor vote in the ACT has a clear floor, and this floor has

been consistent across at least four decades. On three occasions- these being the Legislative Assembly elections of 1974¹, 1989 and 1998 the ACT ALP claimed less than thirty per cent of vote. The Legislative Assembly election of February 1995 saw Labor poll 31.63 per cent of the vote and at the Canberra by-election one month later Labor polled 30.48 per cent.

What this indicates is that the Labor vote in the ACT has a floor of between 25 and thirty per cent, much the same as Queensland (26.66 %, 2012) and New South Wales (24.93%, 2011). Labor, in short, does not win automatically in the ACT. A primary vote of nearly 39 per cent for the ALP cannot be written off as either good luck or a case of Labor merely attaining its base vote.

Not a Liberal Town?

There is a view held by some Canberrans, and often articulated by the ACT ALP, that the Liberal Party is actively antipathetic towards or at a minimum does not care about the ACT. Based on past election results, Canberra does appear to have an anti-Liberal bent that is somewhat more consistent than its pro-Labor bent. Labor's worst results in the ACT have tended to coincide with large votes for minor parties and independents. In 1998, for example, though the ALP polled just short of 28 per cent, the Canberra Liberals also experienced a small negative swing. Some 34 per cent of Canberrans voted for independents or minor parties. In 1989, the Liberal vote was even lower than the ALP's.

If, as discussed above, the minimum vote that the ALP can expect to attain in the ACT is no different to anywhere else, the Liberal vote does appear to have a low ceiling. The Liberal's strongest Federal election performances of the past forty years- 1996, 1977 and 1975 have seen the Liberals poll, respectively, 40.92, 41.87 and 47.32 per cent of the House of Representatives vote. The strongest Legislative Assembly vote ever attained by the Canberra Liberals was 40.48 per cent in 1995. The Canberra by-election saw the Liberal's attain a primary vote of 46.29 per cent, but this should be considered aberrant, as the Government was not at stake. There were, as the successful candidate Brendan Smyth told the *Canberra Times* on the occasion of his defeat in 1995, "a lot of people who

¹ This body was different to the current Legislative Assembly in terms of powers and method of election. It was a purely legislative body with no executive powers.

might have voted for me in the by-election because they thought I was a good bloke [who] weren't going to vote for me in a federal election." All of this suggests that the Liberal vote in the ACT has a general ceiling of just over forty per cent.

In this context, the Canberra Liberal's 2012 result of 38.9 per cent represents a considerable achievement on their part and a cause for concern for the ACT ALP. Should the Canberra Liberals repeat this result in concert with a more significant defection of Labor voters to conservative independents or minor party's than occurred in 2012, ACT Labor's hold on Government would be in very real jeopardy. In short, ACT Labor must continue to win elections. The Liberals cannot be relied upon to lose them.

The Fourth Election

In 2012, ACT Labor was contesting its third consecutive election from a position of incumbency. There have been 17 prior occasions on which Labor Governments have found themselves in an analogous position- that is, having defeated a conservative government at one election and subsequently contesting a third election from a position of incumbency. Two examples come from Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia, three from New South Wales, Queensland and Tasmania, with one each having occurred in the Northern Territory and the Federal sphere.² The earliest of these contests was the Queensland election of 1923, the latest the Northern Territory election of 2012. This, then, is a data set that encompasses most of the history of the ALP. What can it tell us about the ACT election of 2012?

That ACT Labor retained Government was not, in and of its self, exceptional. This was the case in eleven out of the seventeen elections in question. What was exceptional was that ACT Labor achieved a positive swing. This has occurred in only four out of seventeen cases and only once in the last 50 years (New South Wales 1950, Queensland 1923 and 1941 and South Australia 1977). Further to this, some of the worst electoral defeats in Labor history have been delivered by fourth elections.

² The Federal election of 1949 has not been included here, as Labor assumed Government without an election following the collapse of the Fadden Government in 1941 and subsequently contested elections in 1943 and 1946. 1949 was a third, not a fourth, election.

Victoria 1992 (-8.14% swing), Tasmania 1982 (-17.46% swing) and the famous South Australian State Bank swing of 1993 (-9.72) were all products of fourth elections. The average swing experienced by a Labor Government on its fourth election is a negative one, - 5.08 per cent.

Conclusion

The data presented above lends its self to two conclusions, both of which have the virtue of being commonsensical. The first is that the Canberra Liberals did well. They presented and are likely to continue to present a serious threat to the ALP. If one of the conditions generally necessary for a Government to be defeated is that the Opposition “have their act together”, there can be no doubt that in the ACT this condition has been met.

The second is that ACT Labor also did well, and can justly be proud. Labor can no more win by default in Canberra than it can anywhere else, and for the ALP to achieve a positive swing at its fourth consecutive election is, historically, highly unusual. I have been occupied this year with the writing of a short history of the ALP in the ACT. The conclusion I have reached is that “ACT Labor is one of the success stories”. I feel that the results of the 2012 Legislative Assembly election have vindicated that conclusion.